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SECURITY

Contestants to gather in Dover Saturday to test computer security skills

By Jeff Brown

jeff.brown@doverpost.com
@DoPoJeff

Say the word "hacker," and an immediate image comes to mind: either some teenager in a basement trying to download free music or a terrorist in a Third World country working to undermine America's military and economic interests.

Both images represent the extremes, of course, but both are disturbingly real. There aren't too many steps between someone using a computer to steal the latest hit by Bruno Mars or Rihanna and someone else trying to crash the East Coast power grid.

Harnessing those computer skills is the goal of Delaware's first Cyber Aces State Championship, being held Saturday at the Delaware Technical Community College's Terry Campus in Dover.

It is one of seven such competitions either

already held or planned for in different states in 2014.

The event brings together more than 30 students, job seekers and military veterans in an all-day conference and competition, with the winners walking away with a share of a \$10,000 scholarship and the opportunity to enter a national contest that could result in jobs in the cyber security industry.

In light of recent attacks on financial information from well-known stores and government agencies, people with the knowledge and skills to protect sensitive data are at a premium.

"Everything has become automated, including money and the flow of information, which also is very valuable," said Alan Paller, founder of Cyber Aces, the Maryland-based company that aims to find and develop talented people to fill cyber security jobs, and which is sponsoring Saturday's event.

One of those talented people who will be

at the Terry Campus is Josh Davis, a 30-year-old Seaford resident and former guitar teacher studying web application development. Even though cyber security is not directly related to his area of interest, Davis entered the preliminary competition as part of his college studies.

"I'd been thinking about it a lot," he said. "I don't know a lot about information security, but I learned a lot about infrastructure and about how data is transmitted between computers and servers."

Cyber Aces was founded in 2012 by the Department of Homeland Security Task Force on Cybersecurity, which Paller co-chaired.

The problem solvers Cyber Aces is seeking go way beyond someone trying to work around a home PC's anti-virus program, Paller said.

"The challenge we have is that attackers are changing their techniques all the time and

so the people defending computer systems can't just wall up and say, 'I'm OK,'" he said.

"There's a radical shortage of people who know enough about the systems, how to look out for the attackers, and how to find them fast enough to get them out before they do a lot of damage," Paller said.

The talent pool is out there and it's young, with many computer experts in their high school years. A number are military veterans with considerable technological experience in computer systems, he added.

"People who have those types of skills are very important," Davis said. "With all the technology we have today, nothing is 100 percent secure. But if you have someone who knows what they're doing, they can help make it pretty secure."

And what does Davis expect to glean from the competition?

"I'm really interested in learning something new," he said. "I don't expect to find a new position, but it's really just about learning information and new experiences."

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 Adam Ritchie
Managing Editor